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AUTHOR Elardo, Richard; Freund, Judith Horen
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ABSTRACT

The investigation of the relations between maternal child-rearing styles and the social skills of 17 learning disabled children (mean age 9.8 years) occurred in two parts. In the first part, the authors assembled an instrument to study dimensions of maternal behavior which appear to influence the development of children's social skills. This interview/observation schedule, the Home Environmental Process Inventory, was administered in 15 homes. In the second part of the study, two measures of social skills, role taking and interpersonal problem solving, were administered to each learning disabled child in each of the homes. Some maternal behaviors, such as Press for Other-Centered Expectation, correlated highly with children's scores on the social measures. (Author/SBH)

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Maternal child-rearing styles and the social skills of learning disabled boys

Richard Elardo

University of Missouri - St. Louis

and

Judith Horen Freund

Fontbonne College

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EC110339

Richard Elardo
Department of Behavioral Studies
University of Missouri - St. Louis
St. Louis MO 63121

Maternal Styles and Children's Social Skills

Abstract

This investigation of the relations between maternal child-rearing styles and the social skills of learning disabled children occurred in two parts. In the first part, the authors assembled an instrument to study dimensions of maternal behavior which appear to influence the development of children's social skills. This interview/observation schedule, the Home Environmental Process Inventory (HEPI), was administered in 15 homes. In the second part of this study, two measures of social skills, role taking and interpersonal problem-solving, were administered to each learning disabled child in each of those homes. The data were analyzed using correlational techniques. Some maternal behaviors, such as Press for Other-centered Expectation, correlated highly with children's scores on the social measures. Research which attempts to explore relationships between specific parental behaviors and the social skills of the LD child is likely to increase our knowledge of the etiology of social competence among learning disabled children.

Maternal Styles and Children's Social Skills

Maternal child-rearing styles and the social skills of learning disabled boys

This research represents an exploration of what may be termed the "family etiology hypothesis of social disability." That is, the study is addressed to the inter-related notions that there is a social component to learning disabilities, and that the nature of the family environment is related to the learning disabled child's strengths or weaknesses in social skills.

The socio-emotional aspects of learning disabilities are receiving increased attention (Bader, 1975; Bryan, 1974, 1976, in press; Bryan and Bryan, 1977; Guyton, 1970; Kronick, 1976; Lerner, 1976). Lerner (1976) recently reported that learning disabled children often exhibit the following behaviors: poor judgment of the thoughts, feelings, moods, or attitudes of others; insensitivity to the general atmosphere of a social situation, or other socially imperceptive characteristics, such as saying inappropriate things.

Preliminary evidence appears to support the notion that LD children develop in home environments which differ from those of other children (Doleys, Cartelli, and Doster, 1976; Loney, Comly and Simon, 1975; Owen, Adams, Forest, Stolz, and Fisher, 1971; Peck and Stackhouse, 1973; Skillman, 1964). Most of this work has focused upon the parental correlates of academic, rather than social, disabilities.

Maternal Styles and Children's Social Skills

The conceptual and methodological approach in the present investigation has been strongly influenced by two different lines of research (with normal children) in contemporary developmental psychology.

First, Bloom (1964), Dave (1963) and Wolf (1964) have studied a number of dimensions in the home environments of children. Bloom stated that "it is what parents do in the home rather than their status characteristics which are the powerful determiners in the home environment." (pp. 124-125) Following Bloom's theorizing, other researchers have conducted similar studies and found strong relationships between home environmental process variables and children's cognitive development. Process variables which have been studied in the home include parental language style, parental techniques for controlling misbehavior, parental patterns of reinforcement. Recently, several researchers (Elardo, Bradley, and Caldwell, 1975, 1977; Walberg and Marjoribanks, 1973) have reported that ratings based upon environmental process variables have more predictive power than do ratings derived from social status or child development measures.

Recent research in the field of social cognition is also relevant to a fuller understanding of the social deficits of the LD child. The term social cognition has been employed in different ways by researchers of differing theoretical orientations (Shantz, 1975). Conceptually, the term can be said to encompass the subject matter of: empathy (Borke, 1971; Feshbach and Feshbach, 1969); egocentrism (Chandler, 1973a); person perception (Flapan, 1968; Taguiri, 1969);

social sensitivity (Rothenberg, 1970); role-taking (Flavell, 1968); and interpersonal problem solving (Spivack and Shure, 1974).

The social cognitive skills which are the focus of the present study are role-taking and interpersonal problem solving. Role-taking is defined as the ability to "put oneself in the other person's shoes," whereas interpersonal problem solving is the ability to describe a variety of alternative solutions to child-peer and child-adult conflicts.

This study represents an attempt to (a) develop a preliminary instrument to measure home environmental process variables which may be associated with the LD child's social skills, and (b) to relate these aspects of maternal behavior to the specific social skills of role-taking and interpersonal problem solving.

Method

Subjects

The population consisted of 17 clinically diagnosed learning disabled children and 15 mothers, (one mother volunteered three of her children for the study). Sixteen of the children were white males; one was a whit female ($\bar{x}$ age = 9.8 years, S.D. = 1.4 years).

All children had received or were receiving special educational services. Children had been diagnosed by a variety of specialists including educators, psychologists, and multidisciplinary teams. At the time of the study, six children were attending self-contained special classes and five were receiving itinerant services.

Procedure

Maternal measure. To assess aspects of the mother's behavior which might be related to the child's social skills, a Home Environmental Process Interview (HEPI) was administered to mothers in their homes. Items on this interview/observation measure were constructed by the authors as well as adapted or selected from various attempts by other researchers to develop measures which would reveal important aspects of parental behavior in the home environment. The interview/observation scale compiled for the present study enabled an assessment of the LD child's home as a learning environment for social skills. Measured were maternal behaviors which reflected an attempt to engage the child in cooperative interpersonal behavior and to assume social responsibility. Home environmental processes were also assessed in terms of inductive discipline, intellectual stimulation, and maternal sensitivity to children's feelings. Table 1 contains a more detailed description of the HEPI instrument which was assembled for this study.

Insert Table 1 about here

Child measures. First, a role-taking task was employed. It was adapted from those developed by Chandler and Greenspan (1972) and Urberg and Docherty (1976). In adapting the task for use with LD children, story sequences were abridged, visual cues were supplied to reinforce auditory sequences, and answer categories (e.g. sad, mad, afraid) were provided. Thus, an attempt was made to compensate

for sequential memory problems, perceptual deficits, and developmentally delayed expressive language; and to attempt to give each LD child every possible chance to demonstrate his/her maximum level of social-cognitive functioning in the role-taking domain. Two stories which were read to the children comprised the role-taking task. In each of these two-character stories, a later-arriving character is provided with less complete information concerning a story conflict than the earlier-arriving character possesses. In the present study, the children's role-taking task was to suppress their knowledge of the first character's viewpoint and "put themselves in the shoes" of the second character by identifying and explaining the affect of that second character. Children's role-taking responses were rated on a scale of 1 to 3 for each story within the task.

Second, a task of interpersonal problem-solving was administered to the children. This task, adapted from the research of Spivack and Shure (1974), enabled an assessment of the child's ability to conceptualize alternative solutions to social conflict situations. Each child responded to a series of five interview questions, such as "What kinds of things could a boy (girl) do if another child told the teacher you were cheating in school, and you weren't?" Children's responses were scored by counting the number of different ways to solve each problem which they mentioned. A child who said "Blame someone else" and "Deny it" would get a score of 2; a child who gave those responses plus " I'd prove I didn't do it -- my friends can tell you and I could offer to take the test again" would earn a score of 4.

Inter-rater reliability, established with five randomly selected written records from both child measures, was 63%.

Data analysis. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed between maternal and child measures.

Results

All correlational data are presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Of the twelve correlations between maternal and child measures, four were significant. The correlation between children's role-taking and mothers' press for other-centered expectation was .83 ($p < .001$); that between children's interpersonal problem-solving and mothers' parental encouragement techniques was .58 ($p < .008$). The correlation between role-taking and social responsibility (STAUB subscale) was .61 ($p < 005$); that between interpersonal problem-solving and other-oriented induction was .48 ($p < .025$).

Discussion

Although firm causal conclusions cannot be drawn from correlational studies, the results of the present investigation are generally consistent with a family etiology hypothesis of social disability among LD children. The results of the study reveal several strong associations between maternal child-rearing behaviors and the social skills of learning disabled children. The findings would therefore suggest the following inferences and speculations concerning the social consequences of specific maternal processes.

Maternal Styles and Children's Social Styles

The highest correlation found (that of .83 between children's role-taking and mothers' press for other-centered expectation) could mean that a mother who values a child who gets along with adults, shows sympathy and concern for other children and who is considerate of their feelings produces a child who is a successful role-taker despite the presence of learning disability. Following the same logic, the 61 correlation between children)s role-taking scores and the STAUB subscale may indicate that mothers who encourage the LD child to assume duties around the home -- to be socially responsible -- produce children who develop the ability to "put themselves in the other person's shoes." Similarly, the .48 correlation between children's interpersonal problem-solving and mothers' OOI would suggest that mothers who employ the disciplinary technique of other-oriented induction -- pointing out to the child the consequences of his misbehavior for other people -- facilitate their children's abilities to solve interpersonal conflicts. Of course, an alternative although less plausible interpretation of the preceding correlations is that LD children who possess superior social skills encourage the development of more environmentally stimulating parents. Experimental research, path analysis, or crosslagged correlation with larger samples will be required to substantiate the substance and direction of our tentative causal inferences.

The lack of significant correlations associated with child-oriented sensitivity and intellectual stimulation suggest the

following possibilities. There may be fundamental differences between maternal child-rearing practices which reinforce intellectual achievement and maternal processes which facilitate social skills in learning disabled children. Rather than being overly responsive to the child's feelings (the COS subscale) mothers who wish to facilitate social competence should perhaps concentrate more attention upon making the LD child aware of other persons' feelings and of the consequences which the child's actions have for others.

Bryan and Bryan (1977) recently reviewed the literature on the social component of learning disabilities and concluded that:

> ...we know nothing of the socialization methods employed by the parents of learning disabled children. In light of the tradition of focusing upon the family as the etiological force which produced all the myriad of psychopathological states, this lacuna in our knowledge is surprising. It should be remedied. (p. 143)

The present study was designed to obtain information about the role of family etiology in the LD child's social disabilities.

If the results of the present study are substantiated by further research, we may reduce this "lacuna in our knowledge."

More importantly, such results would serve as a source of information for professionals involved in treatment programs for families of learning disabled children.

Maternal Styles and Children's Social Skills

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Table I

Derivation of the HEPI Subscales

Environmental Process Variable	Subscale Name	Theoretical/Empirical Sources
I. Parental encouragement techniques to engage the child in cooperative interpersonal behavior	PET	Authors' naturalistic observation; Staub (1975)
II. Child's assumption of social responsibility within the family unit	STAUB	Staub (1975)
III. Other-oriented induction in parental appeal strategies	OOI	Meta-theoretical network comprised of Bearison and Cassel (1975); Bernstein (1972); Hess and Shipman (1968); Hoffman (1963; Hoffman and Saltzstein, 1967; Hoffman, 1975)
IV. Child-oriented sensitivity in parental appeal strategies and non-disciplinary home environmental transactions	COS	Same as Subscale III
V. Intellectual stimulation provided to child by parents and/or resident siblings	IS	Bloom (1964); Dave (1963); Elardo, Bradley and Caldwell (1975); Wolf (1964)
VI. Press for other-centered expectation in child behavior	POCE	Hoffman (1975)

Table 2

Intercorrelations Among Measures of Maternal Behavior and Measures of the Child's Social Development[a]

	HEPI Subscales					
	PET	STAUB	OOI	COS	IS	POCE
Role-Taking	.28	.61**	.16	.03	.20	.83**
Interpersonal Problem-Solving	.58**	.30	.48*	.17	.32	.13

Note: [a]n = 17

*p < .05

**p < .01